



## SCHOOL COMMITTEE

### BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

November 5, 2024

<b>Meeting:</b>	School Committee
<b>Date:</b>	November 5, 2024
<b>Location:</b>	MERMHS Learning Commons
<b>Attendees:</b>	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Michelle Cresta, Director of Finance & Operations Chris Reed, Chairperson John Binieris Jake Foster Kate Koch-Sundquist, Vice-Chair Anna Mitchell Erica Spencer Theresa Whitman
<b>Absent:</b>	
<b>Guests:</b>	Heather Leonard, Director Curriculum & Technology Kim Provost, Principal Essex Elementary John Willis, Principal Memorial Elementary Joanne Maino, Principal MERMS Julie Sgroi, Principal, MERHS
<b>Recorded by:</b>	Maria Schmidt
<b>Link to Reports and Presentations</b>	<a href="https://www.mersd.org/domain/785">https://www.mersd.org/domain/785</a>

- A. **Call to Order of** – Mr. Reed called the School Committee Business meeting to order at 6:04 p.m.
- B. **Business Meeting Open Session**
  - 1) **Public Comment (Guidelines for public comment can be found in sections BEDH and BEDH-E of the School Committee policy manual)** - none
  - 2) **Chairperson's Report** – Mr. Reed made no report.

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**3) Consent Agenda – Mr. Reed split the warrant.**

- Acceptance of Warrants: AP Vouchers 1022-1023 and payroll warrant for October 24, 2024
- Minutes for approval: October 15, 2024
- Donations – a donation in the amount of \$3,000 from the Friends of Manchester-Essex Performing Arts (FoMEPA) for the support of the combined middle/high school musical, Shrek. Any funds above and beyond those needed for the production may be used at the school's discretion, so long as it directly benefits the high school theater program.

*Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to approve warrants and the minutes; Mr. Foster seconded the motion.*

*The motion passed 6-0, Ms. Spencer was not present for the vote.*

*Ms. Koch-Sundquist moved to approve the \$3000 donation from the Friends of Manchester-Essex Performing Arts for the support of the combined middle/high school musical. Ms. Whitman seconded the motion.*

Questions: Ms. Whitman asked how the donation was initiated and whether there were sufficient supports in place for the musical. Superintendent Beaudoin replied that the check was delivered unsolicited to the high school by FoMEPA. There are three systems in place that provide support for school activities. Stipends support staff participation. Each school has a student activities budget to support field trips, DECA, Debate, etc. It is \$6500 for the middle school and \$25K for the high school. There is also a student activities fund for the musical funded through ticket sales, concessions, etc. This fund has \$13,900. The current donation will support the musical. Superintendent Beaudoin met with Principal Sgroi and the musical director, Ms. Garofalo and they will generate a budget for the musical.

*The motion passed 6-0, Ms. Spencer was not present for the vote.*

**4) Student Report – Stella Straub.** Ms. Straub reported that the high school completed its first quarter and relayed four topics of concern for students:

- a. Learning Commons Student Access** – Ms. Straub said that student access to the learning commons for studying has changed repeatedly. Access as a space for study hall was initially prohibited, then some students were allowed into the space with a pass. Students would like a clear vision for the space, consistent policy, and access to the Learning Commons for studying. The auditorium is less desirable for study periods because it lacks hardtop surfaces for materials. Ms. Straub said that students end up on the ground with their work spread around them.
- b. Attendance and Tardy Policy** – Currently, a student with three tardies meets with the dean of students. That conversation determines the consequences of the tardies. Students have observed that the resulting consequences are

inconsistent between students. Some receive detention and others receive a warning. Students have expressed confusion and frustration with this practice.

- c. **Bus Issues** – Bus shortages have negatively impacted busing for daily use, as well as athletics and activities. Ms. Straub said that she was part of a group left for hours waiting for a pickup. Although the district is documenting the problem, a correction has not been presented. Ms. Straub asked the district to consider other solutions, like renting vans.
- d. **Cell Phone School Use** – Given recent bans by surrounding communities, students are asking what a ban would mean for the high school. Ms. Straub said that teachers already take phones in most classes and that she believes there is a successful structure in place for managing cell phone use. Ms. Straub asked for a comparison between an outright ban and the current practices of teachers to address cell phone use.

Questions: Superintendent Beaudoin stated that she has many of these items on her list for the Superintendent's Update and will address them shortly. The Student Advisory Council met for the first time this year. Future meetings will be held the second Wednesday of each month. Traditionally, a member of the SC represents the committee at these meetings. The superintendent said that this role was previously filled by the SC Chair, but that any member could be the representative. Mr. Reed will review his schedule and gauge interest from other SC members.

## 5) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (John Binieris/Theresa Whitman) – Mr. Binieris stated that the subcommittee toured Memorial Elementary and discussed the timeline and process for the project. Superintendent Beaudoin said that the district has been accepted into the OPM procurement process. She will review the basics of this process at the next SC meeting. It is expected that the district will be onboarding an OPM in March. The district submitted additional information to the MSBA regarding the impending housing development in Essex. The MSBA reviewed the information and recommended holding with the 250 enrollment number.
- **Finance Committee** (Jake Foster/Anna Mitchell) – Ms. Mitchell reported that the subcommittee reviewed the Budget to actual report with Ms. Cresta. They discussed an October annual report, which Ms. Cresta and Superintendent Beaudoin will put together. Mr. Bergevin also provided a cash to actual report for the subcommittee and will provide it quarterly going forward.
- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/ERICA Spencer/Theresa Whitman) – Presentation of Reserve Policy. Ms. Whitman reported that the committee met twice since the last SC meeting to incorporate SC feedback into the revision of the Reserve Policy and to work on statute language. The subcommittee also discussed comparison districts. Ms. Spencer provided comparison policies from Hamilton-Wenham

and Masconomet school districts. Ms. Whitman introduced the Excess & Deficiency policy from the Triton School District at their second meeting. Following review of the Triton policy, the subcommittee wanted to submit it to the full SC for consideration as a template policy. Ms. Whitman stated that the Triton policy contains the elements that the School Committee was considering plus has a clear section for OPEB reserves. Ms. Whitman said that it would be possible to add MERSD-specific components to the Triton template. Ms. Whitman asked for the SC to choose to move forward with the second read of the current reserve policy draft or to consider a new reserve draft utilizing the Triton policy as a template. Ms. Whitman provided a sample of this draft, highlighting components specific to MERSD. Ms. Whitman noted that the Triton draft contains the language “best practices” in several areas. The superintendent has asked district council and the auditors to weigh in on these sections to approve them for use by MERSD.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that the current policy document, which lists 8% as a target, does not align with the district’s current reserve percentage. In addition, although the reserve fund percentage currently exceeds 8% of the operational budget, it does not have enough to meet the approximately \$2M in anticipated spending needs looming in the district’s future. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that any policy will need to reconcile these elements.

Superintendent Beaudoin asked the SC if they would like to continue to pursue the current reserve draft or move to the new format. The superintendent also asked members for input on the technical numbers to be included in the policy.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked for clarification regarding the point in time that reserves are measured, whether the certified E&D will be the measure or if another point will be used. She asked whether the policy would apply to projected costs for the current year only or whether it would account for costs multiple years into the future.

*Ms. Whitman moved to accept the new reserve policy draft, based on the Triton template, submitted by the policy subcommittee. Ms. Koch-Sundquist seconded the motion.*

Questions: Mr. Foster stated that the SC was very close to concluding their internal work on the reserve policy and he preferred to stick with it. Mr. Foster questioned whether the Triton template’s reference to the SC as a governing body is appropriate. Ms. Whitman said that the School Committee is a governing body on par with local government. Mr. Foster said that it raises those questions.

Mr. Foster said that the subcommittee had intentionally not included OPEB reserves in the policy previously because it is not used in operational capital purposes. By including it in the reserve policy, OPEB contributions could be included under the 8% target. Mr. Foster said that inclusion of OPEB in the reserve policy would require more consideration. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the district did use OPEB funds last year, as an operational offset in the amount of \$150K, in the budget. Mr. Foster questioned whether contributing less to the OPEB fund equated to “use” of OPEB funds. Ms. Whitman agreed that the implications for OPEB would need to be considered as it

relates to the 8% target. Given that it was part of the off-set discussion, Ms. Whitman said there should be policy about that usage.

Mr. Foster asked whether the use of other percentages in the Triton template, in effect, create a floor and ceiling range. The SC voted to have a target percentage not a range. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that it is appealing to have a breakdown, regardless of the target number, of where funds will be going. Ms. Koch-Sundquist did not think it was creating a range. Mr. Foster said that the terms should then be updated to *targets* instead of *caps*. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that the reference is to the recommendation of district auditors to maintain at least a 3.5% E&D balance to guard against unforeseen costs. Ms. Whitman said that the SC action item is the next sentence which states that the district will work toward an appropriate E&D balance, but not over the priorities of establishing stabilization. Ms. Whitman said this provides a comparison for the professional recommendation.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that Triton's policy also addresses maintenance of the stabilization fund. Ms. Whitman said that the current decision is whether to use this template to move the discussion forward. Specifics would be discussed further as a full SC discussion. Mr. Foster said that the Triton template includes specific figures for contribution to the Stabilization fund and that he believes this should come from the budget planning process, not policy. Superintendent Beaudoin explained that OPEB contributions are specified by the META contract. Contractually, the district must fund it by the delta of the existing plan when the OPEB trust fund was negotiated, adding the balance of what would have been spent under the old plan. Any realized savings must be shifted into the OPEB plan. This raises the question of whether reduced contributions put the district at risk for contract violation, though there is a clause about use when retiree health could result in loss of workforce or program. The superintendent stated that the specifics of the META contract and OPEB could be the subject of an SC workshop to more fully discuss the district's obligations in this area.

Mr. Foster reiterated that he does not think that inclusion of specific amounts should be included in a policy statement and that those should be part of the budget process. Mr. Foster stated that funding of the stabilization fund should be tackled by the School Committee in the context of the budget.

Mr. Foster expressed concern that in the Triton template there is not declarative language about what the policy is. Instead, the language is framed around what *may* or *can* be done. Ms. Whitman said that the extra effort to update the template would be worth the work to achieve the best policy possible. Ms. Mitchell said that, in her experience, attempting to include everything can get messy and that the best policies remain at a high level. Ms. Mitchell stated that she would prefer to continue work on the original policy draft rather than starting over. Ms. Whitman said that the current document merged the original work with the Triton portions that seemed most beneficial. It does not start over.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that she sees benefits to the updated draft and reiterated her concern about the current reserves being both over the recommended 8% target and also inadequate to meet anticipated needs over the next five years.

Mr. Reed said that the Triton policy fills some of the gaps in the previous draft.

Superintendent Beaudoin observed that the Triton policy is a statement of policy in intended use and articulates the importance of reserves to manage the budget. It provides clarity around each of the components and the role they play in the health of the district.

*The vote passed 4-2. Mr. Foster and Ms. Mitchell voted against. Ms. Spencer was not present for the vote.*

Superintendent Beaudoin said that the next step would be a first read of the updated draft and consideration of any technical inputs. Ms. Whitman said that they would wait to include input from the district's financial advisors before presenting the first read.

- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – No Report

**6) Superintendent's Report** – The superintendent included an enrollment update with SC meeting materials.

- a. **Busing Challenges** – Superintendent Beaudoin reported that families, and the district, are frustrated with transportation service and responsiveness from Salter Transportation. Resolution of their issues is largely beyond Salter's control as they experience driver shortages. The superintendent said that everything is on the table for a resolution. There is not currently an option to go elsewhere. The market is characterized by monopoly. It would also take time for the district to go out to bid. The district is exploring other vendor options for the next school year. The district is also looking at the plausibility of getting a van fleet to assist. Ms. Cresta stated that the Triton School District leases vans for student transportation to activities. This would be permissible for transportation to activities or sports. They could not be used to transport students to and from home, per the bus contract. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that a community member asked about Salter's financial responsibilities given their current failures. Superintendent Beaudoin said that Salter has not yet received a payment from MERSD. Ms. Cresta stated that the district has just received its first bill. It is based on the number of school days. The current contract does not include a clause for transportation failures, but the district has asked for consideration because Salter has not been able to fulfill district needs. Ms. Cresta said that sports transportation is paid separately to for Salter. Ms. Whitman asked if carpooling is a possibility. Superintendent Beaudoin said that carpooling raises concerns about general liability, driver CORI status, and student issues, should students drive themselves or other students. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the problem is solvable, and that Salter currently has additional drivers in the training pipeline. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that she has heard of communication problems when the buses are delayed or cancelled. The superintendent said that messages may be received late given late notification to the district of bus issues. Ms. Koch-Sundquist said that the problems disproportionately affect Essex and asked if

bus stops could be consolidated to a more central spot when needed. Ms. Whitman said that busing issues was raised at “Day on the Hill” and asked that the SC be notified if there is a way for them to advocate for the district on the issue of busing. Superintendent Beaudoin said that Salter used to be a local company. It was acquired by the larger Beacon Mobility. This makes it difficult to reach the owner with concerns. The superintendent said there is no excuse for the current problems and that people should be getting better bus service.

- b. Leadership Team – Administrators will complete seven to eight sessions examining observational practices. The goal is to achieve a calibrated eye resulting in better student outcomes.
- c. Phone Policy Alignment – K-12 is still underway.
- d. Schedule Alignment – Grade 6-12 continuing work.
- e. Library Task Force – planned kick off November 20, 2024. The group will examine use of the space and the challenges of sharing between the middle and high schools.
- f. Two Shout-Outs –
  - i. MERHS was awarded the Sportsmanship Award for Division V. Ms. Molinari shared that this yearly award is present in each of the nine athletics districts. District V has about 40 schools. The award speaks to coach and student comportment on the field and in the stands.
  - ii. Allison Collins and Michelle Cresta were again asked to speak regarding best practices and finance for special education.
- g. Parent Education Series – November 16, 2024, in the M/HS Learning Commons. Kerry Gallagher of St. John’s Prep will present on how to raise healthy digital citizens. The educational series focuses on pathways of preparedness for students. The goal is to have students educated enough to navigate technology outside of the school environment.

Questions – Mr. Foster asked if the school councils from the middle and high school have been included in the scheduling discussion. Superintendent Beaudoin said that they have not yet been included. Currently, the goal is to construct scheduling models. Lunch blocks are a challenge. After this is done, feedback will be solicited. The superintendent said that the goal is to achieve alignment of the learning blocks to account for needs five to seven years from now.

## **7) Continued Business –**

- a. SEPAC Report – postponed

- b. Annual Student Assessment Report – Heather Leonard, Director of Curriculum and principals from all schools. Superintendent Beaudoin introduced this summative dive by principals into data reports for each school, highlighting trends for district growth areas. These include closing gaps for high needs groups and infusing learning with relevancy to students. Ms. Leonard said that the data validates the district’s plans moving forward. Previous emphasis on school culture created a safe learning environment. The district is now poised to turn its attention to intervention and coaching work and to explore increasing relevancy in the learning environment.

The current presentation will provide an overview of several data inputs. More granular information is available in the appendices of meeting presentation materials. Ms. Leonard displayed the Vision of the Graduate as it drives the district’s work and frames any measurement of progress. Ms. Leonard summarized strengths and areas for growth across the district. Highlights include positive trends in attendance, school climate, student growth, and increased consistency across elementary schools. Areas for continued growth include student voice, interest, and connection to learning; consistency and coherence with Tier 1 curriculum and instruction; and addressing inconsistent achievement for student groups. Ms. Leonard shared the Educational Data Pyramid, emphasizing the foundational nature of formative assessments that occur daily in the classroom. Teachers gather data daily in a variety of ways. This data is less accessible. Higher on the pyramid are other measures. Ms. Leonard also presented a graph of student sub-groups, as defined by DESE, which will be discussed in the assessment review. The number of students in the high needs population has been trending up for the district. Typically, these students are at risk for academic success. The high needs population includes students with disabilities, English learners, and low-income students. This population currently stands at 29.3% of MERSD students. In 2014, the group accounted for 18.6% of the population. Ms. Leonard provided district-wide trends across data groups. **Attendance** has improved over the last three years for students across all DESE categories for the last three years. - absent 10 or more days, students chronically absent 10% of the school year, and students chronically absent 20% or more of the school year. **VOCAL** data, gathered from students at the end of their MCAS session, showed a favorable climate for district students. When viewing data, it is important to note that the “most favorable” climate equates to a score of more than 70 points. The district has flagged areas of the VOCAL results in which there is opportunity for growth, including building in authentic learning to center student’s real-life experience and their voices in the learning process. Data for **i-Ready** assessments are gathered three times per year for students in grade one through seven. Kindergarten students are assessed twice, as are grade eight students, who do not take the last assessment of the year. Eighth graders have an extra MCAS Civics test and their i-Ready data is not incorporated into their high school program. It is important to note that students are expected to test “one grade below” for their initial, yearly i-Ready assessment because the



measure is scaled to end of year progress. **Accountability ratings** from DESE are a multi-year measure based on various indicators, including achievement, growth, and chronic absenteeism. Based on past performance, DESE sets target goals for the district and each school. DESE also uses a progress score to measure how well a school or district is making progress toward its targets. DESE's progress score is calculated by adding up points for each category and dividing by the total number of possible points. A score above 50% indicates progress, and a score above 75% indicates meeting targets. DESE also uses a percentile number to measure performance against other schools and districts in Massachusetts. The district has made substantial progress towards its targets. The district is celebrating its eighth-grade students for their performance on the new civics **MCAS**, which they field-tested. At the high school, 404 **AP** tests were taken by 149 students, with 93% scoring a passing score of three or above. Nine courses had a 100% pass rate, and 139 grades of five, the highest mark possible, were earned. The district was named to the AP Bronze Honor Roll and was awarded the AP Access Award.

High School: Julie Sgroi – Principal Sgroi added that the high school is seeing an increase in 2025 AP testing with 162 students registering to take 394 AP exams. In accountability, attendance has improved. Ms. Sgroi shared that the high school received zero accountability points last year for high needs students. This year, they received a score of four. This year the high school received a two for high needs student completion of advanced coursework compared to a score of zero in 2023. Lowest performing and high needs students met their targets. The biology MCAS exceeding expectations score went from 10% to 29%. Principal Sgroi identified growth areas as the dip in MCAS “meeting/exceeding” scores, VOCAL indicators for linking learning to student lives and opinions, and unrealized targets in MCAS achievement. The principal plans to address these areas through Department Chair data reviews and targeted department plans; building cross-content interdisciplinary work; and curriculum reviews with targeted professional development.

Middle School: Joanne Maino – Principal Maino reported substantial progress toward targets. The middle school exceeded targets for chronic absenteeism. Principal Maino distinguished “achievement” as a student’s MCAS score and “growth” as the comparison of that student to similar students. Growth targets were met by all students in math and in ELA by high-needs students. The principal said that meeting these marks is fine, but she would like to push beyond this mark. Data for i-Ready showed a good readiness level for all students in both reading and math. Ms. Maino said that grade six math is an area of focus, although the curriculum review will not occur for math until FY 2026. Geometry has been in need of attention. Ms. Maino said it will be important to see if there are transition issues for incoming students from a curriculum perspective. The principal stated that middle school has many dated curriculum sources, and she is looking forward to the review. Geometry and writing are areas that are showing a need for attention year after year. English teachers are working together, and the grade six team is looking at

writing and alignment of their practices, vocabulary, and approaches. They will put together an abbreviated scope and sequence on writing. Principal Maino said it is time to look at the sequence and depth of the geometry unit – the timeline of student engagement and exactly what they are doing. Student writing will be increased at all levels, and the Middle School Academy will focus specifically on interdisciplinary writing. For seventh grade, the principal has leveraged the learning center to provide in-depth work with students on the cusp of not meeting standards in math. In the new year, the learning center teacher will push into math and English classes to demonstrate how to tackle open response questions. This is a focus on specific skills required by MCAS.

Essex Elementary: Kim Provost – Principal Provost, new to post, stated that last year's MCAS review for Essex Elementary was lackluster. This year, Essex Elementary earned the designation of School of Recognition, awarded to only 57 schools state-wide. This distinction reflects significant achievement, growth, and progress towards targets for MCAS by all students, particularly those in the high needs group. In 2023, the school garnered a 22% progress toward targets versus 85% in 2024. Ms. Provost commended the high needs group for a jump from 9% to 83% progress toward targets. Essex Elementary also showed extraordinary improvement in reducing chronic absenteeism. The principal credited the impact of math intervention, district work on attendance, and Essex's years long efforts to open the building up, offering more extracurricular activities, and creating a welcoming place for students. Essex also saw increases in end of year i-Ready benchmark assessments for reading and math. Ms. Provost said that there are several areas for growth. Written response is a consistent concern, particularly in terms of idea development. Geometry is a concern. The principal said that they are pinpointing a link to vocabulary and will incorporate geometry terms into their annual "Vocabulary Parade." Ms. Provost also pointed to the need for real-world connections and applications in learning. Actions steps will include implementation and reflection on grade five cross-curricular scope and sequence for reading, writing, social studies, and science; utilizing instructional coaches for ELA and math via professional development and support in implementation of Heggerty (reading) and facts fluency (math) tools; and review of homework implementation. Essex Elementary has reinstituted homework as a model and will identify ways to make homework connect to students' lives and real-world problem solving. The VOCAL data also showed that students are not reporting seeing themselves in literature. Ms. Provost said this is the arc of the pendulum for efforts to increase diversity in school literature. The elementary school will also look to increase balance in this area.

Manchester Memorial Elementary: John Willis – Principal Willis shared that Memorial scored in the 93rd percentile for DESE school accountability rating. This was the highest score for the school in the last five years. Mr. Willis said that last year writing was identified as a target area where points were being left on the table. In response, the Memorial leadership council instituted a

writing initiative to increase excitement in writing. Memorial also engaged with pen pals and used bulletin boards to spotlight student work and generate student-driven writing feedback. Principal Willis praised the resulting improvement in topic development and conventions in 2024 MCAS essay scores. Looking to areas for growth, the principal looked at Memorial performance versus the state. By examining a particular question, comparison with state performance yields insight into its developmental appropriateness and indicates if the question was a problem across the state. Red flags are those questions where Memorial scored equal to or significantly lower than the state average. This reflection raised concern in areas related to higher order thinking for ELA and deep concept understanding for math. Mr. Willis will use academic coaching, supplemental materials (pilot programs in fact fluency and ELA/phonics), and revamped after-school clubs to target these areas. Teacher stipends for the after-school homework club have been restructured to offer more targeted instruction in math facts and study skills. An additional book and journaling club is also in the works.

Heather Leonard recapped the strengths of the district and areas for growth. The district will move forward with its goal to amplify student voice, interest, and connection to learning, while maintaining focus on effective Tier 1 curriculum and instruction. The district will also address inconsistent achievement across student groups, inconsistent participation rates (i.e. advanced coursework), and look to intervention access. Ms. Leonard shared District Improvement Plan action steps and emphasized that staff will work vertically across grades. The administration is working to enhance instructional leadership capacity to improve teacher observation and feedback centered around student learning practices. Supporting work around SEL will involve ongoing work. Ms. Leonard emphasized that the ten-year MERSD Strategic Plan is driving the work of the district.

Questions: Ms. Whitman commented that last year the School Committee took a stand to support the district in acquiring needed resources and the results speak volumes. Ms. Whitman advocated for providing the schools with what they need and the space to work.

Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if the DESE grant for high dosage tutoring was restricted to certain grades. Ms. Leonard stated that the state identified grades four and eight as levers. The grant required that these grades receive the tutoring. However, last year the district made use of remaining ESSER funds to expand the service to other grades. Ms. Koch-Sundquist questioned whether the VOCAL question about school work relating to student lives could be in conflict with the emphasis on test scores and testing strengths and asked how educators find balance. Principal Willis said that, while it is understood that educators must answer to the data, staff work to create a balance every day with making learning fun and connecting it to student experience. Principal Maino said that the Vision of the Graduate can be the guide for making instruction more meaningful. A previous survey of students returned the

overwhelming perspective that content was not meaningful to students. Ms. Maino also said that it is a balance to increase this perceived relevancy while preparing students for a one-day assessment. The principal said that she rests in the knowledge that the school is doing what is best for the students while giving them life skills. Ms. Leonard pointed out that what is taught is driven by the standards, but how it is taught is where teachers can create connections to student's lives and be current. Superintendent Beaudoin stressed that it is important to re-conceive how assessment data is interpreted. It is for the purpose of examining the district's shortcomings in communicating to students. It is not about student deficiencies. It is a test of whether the system is aligned, delivering, and finding innovative ways to reach a variety of learners.

Mr. Binieris noted that a common metric for improvement in the VOCAL survey was the opportunity for students to teach in class. Mr. Binieris said that students will choose to present material about which they are passionate.

Principal Sgroi said that several seniors were permitted to walk over to vote for the presidential election. Upon being interviewed, a student said that it was "vision of the graduate stuff." Ms. Sgroi said that it is a natural connection to the four years of civics that they take and that a worthy poll would be a VOCAL-type survey when MERSD students are 21 or 22 years old. Principal Beaudoin stated that the eighth grade civics program is hands-on and project-based, demonstrating that they can use this model while being successful on the standardized assessment.

Ms. Mitchell noted that the high needs group has grown from 18-29% and asked if this correlates with school choice out of the district. Superintendent Beaudoin answered that there is no correlation. Out of district placements typically hold at 20-25 students each year. They are usually placed for health and safety issues. If they are able to take standardized assessments, the scores come back to the district. Ms. Spencer asked if the district's increases in high needs students mirrors the state's trends. Ms. Leonard did not have state data, but shared trends over age groups for SPED eligibility and trends in growth of subgroups in the high needs group. The largest increase has been for low-income students.

Ms. Collins joined the conversation remotely and stated that the number of SPED students has not changed much over time. However, declining overall enrollment has increased its percentage of the total population.

Ms. Mitchell contrasted the VOCAL 60% rating for safety in sharing feelings with the 99% rating for safe at school and asked if this is a contradiction. Mr. Willis said that the wording of questions could be a component of the seeming contradiction. He also questioned the likelihood, from a developmental perspective, that all students in this age range would be comfortable talking about feelings. Ms. Provost said that it would be beneficial to break the

feelings safety question into two, sharing with a teacher versus other students. She said that vulnerability is required to share with a peer.

Ms. Spencer noted that Principal Maino expressed concern with the math program and asked if the district should consider moving up the curriculum review or thinking more creatively about it. Ms. Maino said that there is a structured review cycle, but that she would be open to it. Ms. Leonard stated that the review process does not yield change immediately. There are short term steps that can be taken, including targeted support and curriculum resource tools. Moving up a review would require significant investment of time and the allocation of resources. Ms. Spencer stressed that the SC would like to be made aware of needed district support to meet these challenges.

Mr. Foster expressed concern about MCAS performance gaps for students with disabilities and the hope that i-Ready data for this group is also being scrutinized with this lens in order to consider what it means for these students and the classroom supports that they are due. Mr. Foster said that current metrics provide insight into the district's performance to the standards. Mr. Foster asked what other metrics administrators would like to see added in the future to show that the district has met its goal for producing a well-rounded student.

Ms. Collins clarified that students qualify for special education because they need remediation and have scores that are below grade level. There are also students who receive services through SPED and exit the program. They are still students with disabilities, but they are performing at grade level. Their scores would then be counted with the general population. Most students are identified by age 12-13. Students with moderate disabilities often exit special education by the time they reach high school. In looking at uneven scores at the high school level, this group is often comprised of students with more severe needs who continue to remain in special education long term. Spikes will result if a higher need cohort is part of the current population. Ms. Collins emphasized the need to take a closer look at results to understand the current group. She said it should not be expected that a point will be reached when special education students would perform as well as their general education peers, emphasizing that once students are able to perform at grade-level they exist SPED, and their scores are included in the general population. Mr. Foster will follow up with Ms. Collins about his understanding of special education qualifications. Ms. Collins reiterated that qualification requires a two part combination – the identification of a disability *and* the failure to make effective progress.

Speaking to the question of additional data points, Principal Sgroi suggested an exit survey or portfolio. Principal Maino stated that a portfolio where students self-select and self-assess would allow them to articulate the growth they have experienced. Ms. Maino commented on the journey through the entire district for a student and said that experience is not represented by

looking at just one year of school. Principal Provost said that it would be helpful to have a demonstration of learning year to year, like a portfolio. Ms. Provost also pointed to the foundational, formative daily assessments that drive learning and are dynamic in nature. This would be great to capture, but Ms. Provost was unsure what assessment would do so. Principal Willis noted that the current assessments target different areas – VOCAL quantifies qualitative information; MCAS provides summative data; and i-Ready is a formative assessment. Mr. Willis said that he would like more home grown versions that counter inherently flawed items and make the assessments more applicable to the local experience. In addition to a performance or portfolio measure, Mr. Willis said he would like to add a parent survey of their experience at the elementary level and whether their student was prepared for middle school.

Mr. Reed asked about data for school similar to MERSD. Ms. Leonard said that there is MCAS DART comparison information available through DESE which contrasts MERSD to state identified-schools with similar demographics. Mr. Reed asked if similar after school clubs focusing on study skills and organization strategies are available at EES and the middle school. He said they could address gaps.

Ms. Mitchell said that she would like to see data for SAT scores and where students are attending college, as well as trends in these areas over the years.

c. Budget

- i. FY25 Budget Fall Budget to Actual Report – Michelle Cresta. Ms. Cresta referenced the budget-to-actual report contained in SC meeting materials. It is the first Q1 report and is a work in progress that will adapt to member requests. As of September 30, 2024, the district has spent \$5,593,357 or 18.3% of our operating budget. As of September 30, a quarter of the fiscal year is complete. However, many district expenses are either front loaded or pertain only to the 10-month period when school is in session which began at the end of August. Our percentage of funds spent verses the percentage of how far we are into the fiscal year are skewed due to the differing cycles. Of note, the district was able to pay a portion of OOD expenses at the end of last year; ten-month employees do not start getting paid until September; and the district has not paid transportation expenses yet because they had not been billed. Ms. Cresta said that the fiscal year appears to be in good order. A year-to-date, line-item analysis of the operating budget is in process and will provide insight into areas to watch more closely.

The cash summary quarterly report breaks out funds by operational, OPEB, and Student Activities. Much of these funds have restricted use. For instance, 1.5% of the cash balance equates to the stabilization fund and cannot be used for operational expenses. Other amounts are ear-marked for student lunch accounts or student activities funds. Debt

payments are made twice per year. The report also provides monthly activity for income and expenses.

Questions: Ms. Mitchell requested a year-to-date reserve fund balance report. Ms. Cresta said that the goal is to have that report by the end of the year.

- ii. FY26 Budget Planning – Superintendent Beaudoin stated that principals are in the process of building budgets for submission to Ms. Cresta on November 18. A draft, tentative budget will be out just before the Thanksgiving break. Superintendent Beaudoin requested that the School Committee present its charge for the budget at the next SC meeting. The superintendent said that healthcare is starting very high. The district is preparing the number for META personnel based on current contracts. The percentage is expected to be in the 4% area. SPED OOD tuition expense increases are capped by the state in the mid-3% range. The superintendent asked if the SC will want budget scenarios and how they would like the budget to account for any personnel asks. Superintendent Beaudoin asked if the SC is looking for a level-funded budget. The superintendent said that, while the majority of staff are covered by collective bargaining contracts, the district needs to address remaining employees who are not included. They have been held to a COLA of 2.5% for the last several years.

Questions: Mr. Reed highlighted the disparity resulting from this unequal salary growth. Mr. Reed asked if there is movement on the K-6 foreign language program. Superintendent Beaudoin said that alignment of staffing between the middle and high school, through the schedule work currently being pursued, would allow the program to run in grades 6-12 without adding to the operational budget. Re-introduction at the elementary level will require an additional faculty member. The superintendent said that they are looking to 2027 to have a plan in place.

- d. School Committee Ongoing Work - postponed
  - i. Goal Development
  - ii. Subcommittee Charge Development

#### **8) School Committee Comment - None**

### **C. Adjourn**

*Mr. Foster moved to adjourn the School Committee business meeting; Ms. Mitchell seconded the motion.*

*The motion passed 6-0. Ms. Whitman was not present for the vote.*

*Meeting Adjourned at 8:44 pm*

**School Committee Future Meetings**

- November 19, 2024
- December 3, 2024
- December 11, 2024, Wednesday
- December 19, 2024, Thursday